

oneonone

The Burning Breeze of Bisasar

Interview with Sajida Khan

by Rehana Dada with Kathleen Millar

This interview first appeared in the journal Agenda (No.73, 2007).



Warrior Woman. Sajida Khan was a community leader who opposed the construction and operation of the Bisasar Road landfill. Her struggle is being continued by her fellow residents and a much larger community of environmentalists.

Photo by Patrick Bond.

Four years before her death, Durban activist Sajida Khan shared her thoughts on the Bisasar Road dump site that her community has been campaigning for its closure. Sajida died of cancer in 2007. To this day, the Bisasar Road dump site continue emitting highly toxic greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and contaminating water resources. While the municipality imagines huge profits from carbon credits, the community languishes with the poisonous air.

Rehana Dada: *How long have you been fighting this dump?*

Sajida Khan: I became involved with the community association in mid-1993 and then fought the rates campaign. One year, we, Indians paid about 80 per cent higher than the whites. And of course the money was used to develop [the] white areas [while the] Indian areas were neglected.

RD: *Had the dump been there your entire childhood?*

SK: I grew up here. The dump site has been here since 1980. People were fighting it since it was proposed. The council hall was in the valley and homes were removed to build this dump. You cannot put a dump site in the middle of a highly developed residential area, with ten schools within one kilometre.

Although this dump site was classified as a domestic dump site, they ended up dumping hazardous waste. So [it was] an incorrect classification and an incorrect location. This is the kind of terrain we have in Bisasar [Road], with hills on both sides, so you get a concentration of pollution. If it was a flat terrain, the gases would be more diffused.

RD: This is an enormous area.

SK: It's more than 44 hectares.

RD: Where does the waste come from?

SK: From all over Durban.

RD: You have quite a view of this dump from your lounge window.

SK: It used to be lovely. Everybody enjoyed the views. The manner in which this permit was granted was unfair to the community. In 1994, the council had already adopted Local Agenda 21, that was based on the United Nations' Agenda 21. This means that there should be public participation. The permit was granted in 1996.

RD: So this dump has a history of violating community concerns?

SK: Oh yes. Before the 1994 elections, we were basically gagged. There was no freedom of speech. But the community wrote letters of objection. Yet even the 1991 Berne Convention was violated. The Convention protects migratory birds. This area had a natural spring and because of [it], the swallows relied on the mud to build their nests. We used to have more than three nests attached to our buildings and garage and right now, there is not one. The birds have gone because of the pollution levels. Both the flora and fauna are affected.

RD: Is it the pollution levels or is it just the noise and activity around the dump site?

SK: Both. The noise chases the birds away, but pollution levels including the leaching that is

highly toxic, contaminate the water. As early as 1987, the city promised to close this dump site and [replace it with] these sports fields. They broke that promise. Then [during] the 1994 elections, the political parties promised to close this dump. Again they broke that promise.

Before the permit was granted, they should have created a buffer zone to protect the people. The buffer zone should be a minimum of 800 meters for a dump site this size. But that was not done.

RD: Would the buffer zone help with the pollution problems?

SK: Well, the pollution would still be produced but the people would be protected. They would be farther away. Because of this valley effect, there is a poor diffusion of the gases. The medical waste incinerator produced dioxins,

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which are highly toxic, causing cancer. Lead emissions from that incinerator exceeded the guideline limit by 30 to 40 times. The cadmium level exceeded two to three times the maximum recommended limit.

RD: I believe the medical waste incinerator was shut down about six or seven years ago.

SK: Yes, the incinerator was shut down, but the effect it leaves behind... You cannot just get rid of the pollution. It settles. And most of the waste was burned at night. Now they

want to put a new set of generators in the valley and flare off additional methane that would not be used for electricity. In the process, more than 43,000 tonnes of carbon [will be] produced a year. They are saying it is going to alleviate global warming because they are going to get carbon credits.

RD: The municipality argues that they can take methane out of that landfill and burn it and have a net positive impact on greenhouse gases.

SK: Methane is extremely light compared to carbon dioxide. It just dissipates into the air fairly easily while carbon dioxide tends to linger. People around here would be affected more by the carbon dioxide. In addition, the generators would produce 95 tonnes of nitrogen oxide, which causes respiratory problems and exacerbates asthma [as well as] 319 tonnes of carbon monoxide

organic compounds contain benzene and formaldehyde, that include carcinogens and cause respiratory problems.

RD: Comparing the landfill gases as they are now to the effects from combusting the landfill gases – could you anticipate a difference?

SK: In my opinion, it would make a bad situation even worse because the flaring will increase by a factor of 15, according to the government's paperwork. All those gases cannot be extracted overnight, so one needs to get all these moving into the air. Then there will be six generators producing other gases.

In addition, by bringing the gases up, the leachate comes up to the surface. The leaching is really poorly managed, with the overflow of leachate from the wells, producing all those toxic gases, those non-methane organic compounds. Then the generators themselves are extremely noisy. One can see how close the schools lie. Even if they put those generators in sound-proof rooms, it would not solve the problem of pollution.

RD: I hear a lot of noise just from the traffic here. How would generators compare this noise?

SK: It is even noisier. I have been to sites overseas. For generators producing 2.7 megawatts of electricity, we could not even hear the others speak when we visited the site. The noise will travel. It tends to follow the same pathway as the pollution pathway.

On Bisasar [Road] itself, they want to put six of these generators. Yet this is not an industrial area. It is a residential area.

RD: The Durban Solid Waste is adamant that what they are doing is not only affecting global greenhouse gas levels positively but that they will be benefiting the community through capital injection into developing members of the community and by reducing the landfill gases.

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that reduces the oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood. Then, it would produce more than 300 tonnes of total hydrocarbons, that contain gases like benzene, which is a carcinogen.

RD: How would you compare gases caused by the burning of the landfill gas to the gases coming out of that landfill site now?

SK: What happens now is that there is a decomposition of the waste and that means methane, toxic groundwater leaching and non-methane organic compounds. They already found levels of these compounds exceeding the maximum recommended limit by 500 per cent at this site. Non-methane



Giant Garbage Bin. Covering more than 40 hectares of land, the Bisasar Road dump site accepts up to 5,000 tonnes of all kinds of wastes daily. Despite the health risks it poses to surrounding communities and its massive greenhouse gas emissions, the local government has decided to continue the dump site's operations, particularly given the revenues it can earn from power companies under the Clean Development Mechanisms (CDM).

Photo from RealWire

SK: How are they going to actually improve the lives of the community [members] when these generators will be producing all these gases? In addition, they will extend the life of the dump for seven to eight years. So they are going to dump more and more dirt on this site. And one can see the [poor] management of the site. They have been dumping things that they should not be dumping here.

RD: What do you suggest that they do with that methane if they don't burn it?

SK: Since the 1990s, we have been asking them to remove the methane. What they can do is look for alternatives. There is gas liquification process that can take out the methane, purify it and add it to diesel for trucks and use it as fuel. It can be pumped and used in industries.

There is a gas pipeline running right along the dump site. All they have to do is extract and purify the gas and add it to that pipeline. It is far cheaper but they would not get so much of the emissions reduction credits. But then what is more important, the health of the community or making money at the

expense of the community? If this dump site was located out of the city, far away from people, this project would have been ideal, to extract the gases and produce electricity. But because it is going to affect the community so badly, we object to it.

RD: If the municipality was to decide against the burning of the gases, it would have to incur expenses to find another way to deal with the methane.

SK: Now that is a lot of nonsense. According to their scoping reports, the capital costs will be R106.8 million (\$15.3 million) and general expenditure R41.7 million (\$6 million), for a total of R148.5 million (\$21.3 million). It will take them 21 years to recover that money in the form of credits. The profit over the 21 years is only going to be R59.9 million (\$8.6 million).

One can take the R148.5 million (\$21.3 million) and put it in the bank at no risk whatsoever, receive a six per cent rate of return and over six years, you can recover more than R60 million (\$8.6). It does not even make economic sense to invest in the CDM project. This money can be used to create the buffer zone. ■